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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

6 August 1956

STAFF MEMORANDUM NO. 57-56

SUBJECT : Proposal for an NIE on Prospects for Fundamental  
Change in the Soviet System

1. One of the key questions raised by the far-reaching developments in the USSR since the death of Stalin is that of the extent to which the many changes instituted by the new collective leadership might set in motion irreversible trends which could ultimately affect the very structure and outlook of the Soviet state. This subject has been extensively alluded to in the press and elsewhere (not least by George Kennan in his forecast of a "slow erosion of despotism") but there has as yet been no fully elaborated analysis which pulls together and weighs all the many possibilities involved. We attempted to refer briefly to this problem in para. 3A of NIE 11-4-56, but it was rejected by the IAC.

2. Assuming indefinite continuation of present trends in the USSR (as we do in NIE 11-4-56), it seems to me that the above question will be one of ever-increasing policy concern. It also strikes me as being a subject on which the intelligence community ought to have something, however speculative, to say. At the IAC Reps meetings and at the IAC itself, State suggested that this was a subject better dealt with at length in a separate estimate.

3. Among the possible objections to doing an NIE on this subject are the following:

a. It is too speculative. Admittedly so, but it is no more speculative than a number of other longer-range projections that we have attempted. My feeling on papers of this type is that we should try them on an experimental basis if a real need exists, with the understanding that we will cancel them if they don't pan out.

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b. It will be difficult to coordinate. To me, this is a much more cogent objection, as we have had plenty of experience with agencies whittling "think pieces" of this type down to near-meaninglessness. On the other hand, a good coordinated estimate on this subject would be more valuable than an uncoordinated one, both for its impact on the policymaker and for its educational value in forcing the agencies to think about a problem with which we shall almost certainly become more and more engaged. One possibility would be to do this paper first as an internal one, coordinating it with O/CI, DD/P, SRS, etc. Then, if we liked it ourselves we could submit it to the agencies. A justification for this procedure would be that contributions are not really of much use for such speculative pieces.

c. This subject can be covered in other NIE's. An alternative would be to deal with it in the Long-Term Trends estimate scheduled for 1st Quarter 1957. We will certainly want to deal with it in this paper in any case but I feel that we should be careful not to bury truly major estimative subjects within larger papers where they do not have the same impact. The "Trends" estimate will encompass a whole series of projections about nuclear developments, military power balance, Free World trends, economic outlook, etc. Thus there may not be as much space available for treating the prospects for basic shifts in the USSR as might be desirable and in any event this problem will have to be sandwiched in among many others.

4. If all we could usefully say about this problem could be said in four or five paragraphs I would agree that "Long-Term Trends" above would be a suitable vehicle. However, I feel that our speculation about the likelihood of basic changes in the Soviet system and outlook should bring together a wide variety of hypotheses on such subjects as (a) the further development of vested interests among the bureaucracy and its impact on policy-making; (b) the potential effect on both elite and popular attitudes of a reduction in overt police controls, a more relaxed intellectual atmosphere, and greater availability of consumer goods; (c) the likely impact on the role of the police, army, and party; (d) the implications of the above for future foreign and domestic policy; (e) whether the trends created are indeed irreversible;

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(f) whether a "slow erosion of despotism" is likely, for example; and (g) whether this or other liberalizing trends will necessarily mean a reduction in the over-all Soviet threat. The above are only some of the many possible lines of inquiry, and in my view they merit highlighting in, say, a 10-20 page paper rather than a few paragraphs in a still broader NIE.

5. Consequently, I recommend that we : (1) immediately prepare brief Terms of Reference as a basis for Board discussion; (2) if the approach is satisfactory, undertake an internal Board paper, to be coordinated with SRS, O/CI, and DD/P as appropriate; and (3) if this paper in turn seems satisfactory, consider coordinating it as a 4th Quarter NIE.

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